

EMBLEMATIC SCENES IN SUETONIUS' *VITELLIUS*¹

relegatis post terga manibus, iniecto ceruicibus laqueo, ueste discissa seminudus in forum tractus est inter magna rerum uerborumque ludibria per totum uiae Sacrae spatium, reducto coma capite, ceu noxii solent, atque etiam mento mucrone gladii subrecto, ut uisendam praeberet faciem neue summitteret; quibusdam stercore et caeno incessantibus, aliis incendiarium et patinarium uociferantibus, parte uulgi etiam corporis uitia exprobrante; erat enim in eo enormis proceritas, facies rubida plerumque ex uinulentia, uenter obesus, alterum femur subdebile impulsu olim quadrigae, cum auriganti Gaio ministratorem exhiberet. tandem apud Gemonias minutissimis ictibus excarnificatus atque confectus est et inde unco tractus in Tiberim.

(Suet. *Vit.* 17.1-2)²

Suetonius' biography of Vitellius, a brief, but systematic, attack on that emperor's character and principate, culminates in the lurid scene quoted above, in which Vitellius is executed. Why should Suetonius have represented Vitellius, who reigned for so short a time, in such harshly negative terms? Partly, no doubt, because the basic tradition about Vitellius was established during the era of the Flavians, by whom, of course, he had been overthrown. The ancient source who most nearly approaches the almost uniformly negative picture provided by Suetonius is Flavius Josephus, and, at least in his case, for obvious reasons.³ But while the portrait offered by our other principal sources, Tacitus and Dio, is indeed decidedly unflattering and hostile, being largely based upon the same source-material as Suetonius', it is not without some attempt at equity (e.g. Tac. *Hist.* 3.86; Dio 65.6). Thoughtful and creative ancient historians are not prisoners of the bias of their source-material: they have the freedom to make aesthetic and, in a sense, moral, choices. Testimony to the effectiveness of Suetonius' portrait in the *De Vita Caesarum* of an indigent and gluttonous Vitellius is the continued vitality of that portrait, both in antiquity and beyond: Vitellius assumes

¹ I thank the *Histos* team for helpful advice on organization and presentation.

² All citations of Suetonius are from the text of M. Ihm, *C. Suetonii Tranquilli Opera*, vol. 1, *De Vita Caesarum Libri* (Leipzig 1908).

³ Joseph. *Bj* 4.595-6; T. Rajak, *Josephus* (London 1983) 214; B. Richter, *Vitellius: Ein Zerrbild der Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt am Main 1992), has most recently discerned the standard ingredients comprising the portrait of a tyrant in the attacks on Vitellius.

pride of place among the villains in the dread catalogue of the Caesars, beside Tiberius, Caligula, and, especially, Nero.⁴ But the effectiveness of that portrait is a tribute not only to the vigour of the underlying Flavian propaganda but also, and more importantly, to the artistry of Suetonius as he creatively shapes his raw material.

It is clear, alike from Suetonius, Dio and Tacitus, that the basic tradition made much of the disparity between Vitellius' character and the position that he enjoyed as emperor. At 65.5 Dio remarks on this contrast and notes the bemusement of many contemporaries at the sight of Vitellius in a solemn religious procession, or clad in the imperial purple, surrounded by a group of soldiers on the Capitoline, or greeted by a crush of well-wishing admirers.⁵ The humor, as Dio observes, derives from the fact that Vitellius' former ways were notorious, and so the disparity between his former conduct and present station was patent and laughable. A similar discrepancy is alluded to by Tacitus when he remarks upon the hypocrisy of Vitellius as he delivered to the populace a speech extolling his own diligence and restraint.⁶

The present study analyzes Suetonius' method of constructing his portrait of Vitellius through the use of emblematic scenes. In what follows, I will enlarge on the theme of disparity between Vitellius' private life and public station to demonstrate that it is a staple of Suetonius' biography. I shall be showing that emblematic scenes, such as the *acclamatio*, *aduentus*, and *iter*, familiar to a Roman audience through various media, systematically underscore this dimension of his characterization. Such episodes of course really did occur, but as stock scenes they had become stereotyped in imperial advertisement during the first century of the Principate. Suetonius' representation of Vitellius in these scenes makes him out to be ludicrous, vulgar, and inept, thereby deflating their normally laudatory official qualities. In effect,

⁴ Cf. Philostr. *VA* 5.29, 32-3; further, R. Engel, 'Das Charakterbild des Kaisers A. Vitellius bei Tacitus und sein historischer Kern,' *Athenaeum* 55 (1977), 346f.; and see Richter (above, n. 2), 9-12, with abundant references, ancient and modern.

⁵ 'Vitellius, however, furnished many with material for amusement. They could not restrain their laughter when they beheld wearing a solemn face in the official religious processions a man whom they knew to have played the strumpet, or saw mounted on a royal steed and clad in a purple mantle him who used, as they knew full well, to wear the Blue costume and curry the race-horses, or when they beheld ascending the Capitol with so great a crowd of soldiers him whom previously no one could catch a glimpse of even in the forum because of the throng of his creditors, or saw receiving the adoration of all a man whom, a while before, nobody would readily have consented even to greet with a kiss' (tr. E. Cary).

⁶ *Hist.* 2.90: *Postera die tamquam apud alterius civitatis senatum populumque magnificam orationem de semet ipso prompsit, industriam temperantiamque suam laudibus attollens, consciis flagitiorum ipsi qui aderant omnique Italia, per quam somno et luxu pudendus incesserat*; cf. *Hist.* 2.89: *non Vitellio principe dignus exercitus*; see Engel (above, n. 3) 364.

Suetonius recreates a Vitellius within apparently propagandistic frameworks which are undermined by his own character and actions. On the other hand, the graphic description of Vitellius' end, when the emperor is mocked, tortured, and executed on the Gemonian Steps, also contributes to the characterization,⁷ but it does so in a significantly different way. While the scenes familiar from imperial advertisement highlight Vitellius' inappropriateness within that scenario, it emerges in the finale that the Gemonian Steps is an entirely appropriate context because of the delineation of the emperor's character that has gone before. How these uses of scene and place converge at the end of the biography will form my own conclusion.

Suetonius makes a pivotal statement in his biography of Vitellius, asserting that, although initially showing promise as an emperor in his dealings with the Praetorian Guard, Vitellius reverted to his former manner of life when he came to power:

...egregie prorsus atque magnifice et ut summi principis spem ostenderet, nisi cetera magis ex natura et priore vita sua quam ex imperii maiestate gessisset. (10. 1)⁸

The remark anticipates the exposition of the reign itself, but it is obviously retrospective too,⁹ because it refers to Vitellius' character and life before accession (*natura et priore uita*).¹⁰ As a focus, the remark also underscores the disparity between the dignity of imperial office and Vitellius' conduct. This disparity is elaborated and reinforced by the immediate context in which the

⁷ E. Cizek, 'La mort de Vitellius dans les "Vies des douze Césars" de Suétone,' *REA* 77 (1975), 125-30; see by contrast Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.85-86, who allows Vitellius a measure of dignity in his *ultima verba*; the obituary is harsh, but exhibits more equity than Suetonius does (R. Syme, *Tacitus* [Oxford 1958], vol. 1, 190; K. Wellesley, ed. *Cornelius Tacitus: The Histories Book III* [Sydney 1972], 188, *ad loc*; cf. Dio 65.6).

⁸ See C. Murison ed., *Suetonius: Galba, Otho, Vitellius* (Bristol 1991), *ad loc.*, who notes that this is the only indication in Suetonius of a more favourable view of Vitellius; cf. his remarks on *Vit.* 1.1.

⁹ Compare the reaction of Vitellius' parents to his horoscope, and especially that of his mother: 3.2 *Genituram eius praedictam a mathematicis ita parentes exhorruerunt, ut pater magno opere semper contenderit, ne qua ei prouincia uiuo se committeretur, mater et missum ad legiones et appellatum imperatorem pro afflicto statim lamentata sit.*

¹⁰ Not coincidentally, this comment has affinities with statements in the biographies of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, in so far as these emperors too took a turn for the worse; cf. *Cal.* 22. 1, *Ner.* 19.3, *Dom.* 3.2; cf. *Tib.* 4 1; see also R. Lounsbury, 'Inter quos et Sporus erat: The Making of Suetonius' "Nero",' *ANRW* II. 33.5 (1991), 3757, commenting on the centripetal force of the Domus Aurea in the *Nero* (also below, n. 12); compare Tac. *Hist.* 1.91: ... *quae grata sane et popularia, si a virtutibus proficiscerentur, memoria vitae prioris indecora et vilia accipiebantur.*

statement is made, for it is surrounded by three stereotypical *loci*, all of which serve to illustrate Vitellius' complete unsuitability for the throne: his elevation (*consalutatus*), the journey to Rome (*iter*), and the entry into the city (*aduentus*). These 'commonplaces' of narrative (*loci, topoi*), themselves characterized by a strong sense of physical place, fuse with the commonplaces, and the spatial claims, of the rituals of imperial power. On one level, in a biography marked by so strong a visual sense, it is appropriate that the imitation and the things imitated should be one; on another level, however, these commonplaces, so far from reassuring the reader by their very familiarity, serve to expose the disunity of the person imitated, the disunity between his outward appearance and his inner character.¹¹

The first of these three stereotypical *loci* is the account of the soldiers' acclamation. Suetonius tells of Vitellius, looking rather ridiculous, dressed informally as he was, but with sword drawn, lifted on the shoulders of his troops and carried about to nearby villages:

...neque diei neque temporis ratione habita, ac iam vespere, subito a militibus e cubiculo raptus, ita ut erat in veste domestica, imperator est consalutatus circumlatusque per celeberrimos vicos, strictum Diui Iuli gladium tenens detractum delubro Martis atque in prima gratulatione porrectum sibi a quodam. (8.1)

The mention of Dius Julius and Mars contrasts markedly with the adventurer who is brandishing the sword *in ueste domestica* at the very moment at which he has attained supreme power.¹²

The second is the account of Vitellius' march through Gaul to the battlefield at Bedriacum:

¹¹ The relationships between the idea of narrative as space and the physical spaces that the narrative describes (and in a sense creates) and between literary 'commonplaces' and actual physical places have stimulated some exciting recent scholarship, e.g. Leach and Vasaly (n. 37 below); C. S. Kraus, 'No Second Troy: Topoi and Refoundation in Livy, Book V', *TAPA* 124 (1994) 267-89; M. Jaeger, *Livy's Written Rome* (Michigan 1997), esp. 178-82; on the capacity of commonplaces both to familiarise/reinforce and to problematise/shock see e.g. Kraus, *Livy: Ab Urbe Condita Book VI* (Cambridge 1994) 15-16.

¹² The more detailed account of Vitellius' elevation in Tac. *Hist.* 1.55-57 and Plut. *Gal.* 22.3-8 likewise show the emperor in a rather undignified light; Murison (above, n.7) 150, observing that Suetonius' version leaves out details and is highly compressed, suggests it is perhaps badly recorded from a source; but the details that remain make Vitellius and his elevation ridiculous, not merely undignified (see also R. Lounsbury, *The Arts of Suetonius* [New York 1987] 99).

namque itinere incohato per medias ciuitates ritu triumphantium vectus est perque flumina delicatissimis navigiis et variarum coronarum genere redimitis, inter profusissimos obsoniorum apparatus ... (10.2)

The description of this journey follows immediately after Suetonius' statement about Vitellius' reversion to his former lifestyle (10.1), thus reinforcing its meaning. The epexegetical particle *namque* makes the connection explicit. The debauchery of this march, highlighted by the superlatives (*delicatissimis*, *profusissimos*), makes a mockery of the words *ritu triumphantium*;¹³ even more revolting is the report of Vitellius' visit to the battle site at Bedriacum:

utque campos, in quibus pugnatum est, adit, abhorrentis quosdam cadauerum tabem detestabili voce confirmare ausus est, optime olere occisum hostem et melius civem. nec eo setius ad leniendam gravitatem odoris plurimum meri propalam hausit (10.3)¹⁴

Third, Vitellius and his entourage then proceed to Rome; after spending the night in the Apennine Hills (*peruigilium*, 10.3), they pompously enter the city:

urbem denique ad classicum introiit paludatus ferroque succinctus, inter signa atque vexilla, sagulatis comitibus ac detectis commilitonum armis. (11.1)¹⁵

Entering Rome in panoply with such vainglorious fanfare, particularly after Suetonius' report of the ridiculous elevation and dissolute march, reinforces the negative view of Vitellius. This feeling is only intensified with the doleful observation that once Vitellius reached the city, in addition to expressing his reverence for Nero, he increasingly ignored all divine and human sanctions, culminating in his assumption of the office of *pontifex maximus* on the anniversary of the Roman defeat at the Allia (11.2).¹⁶

These three scenes involve Vitellius' elevation to the throne and its consequences; they corroborate Suetonius' statement that Vitellius acted ac-

¹³ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 2.62, 68; Murison (above, n. 7), 156; L. Braun, "Vitellius und Tiberius bei Tacitus und Sueton," *WJA* n. f. 16 (1990), 209; Richter (above, n. 2) 246.

¹⁴ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 2.70; Engel (above, n. 3) 364.

¹⁵ Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.89, writes that Vitellius, at the Milvian Bridge, was dissuaded from entering Rome in military regalia as though entering a conquered city; thus Vitellius compromised, but only slightly.

¹⁶ *Vit.* 11.2: *magis deinde ac magis omni divino humanoque iure neglecto Alliensi die pontificatum maximum cepit*; cf. Tac. *Hist.* 2.91, and Dio 65.2; further, Murison (above, n. 7) 157-8, and Engel (above, n. 3) 354, n. 23 on this passage.

ording to his character rather than the dignity of the office. They gain even more point because they satisfy the readers' expectations, carefully worked up in the narrative regarding Vitellius' life and career before accession.¹⁷ Lucius, the father of the emperor, despite the fact that he had held three consulships (two of them with the emperor Claudius) and a censorship besides, is held up for reproach because of his notorious (*perinfamis*) infatuation for a freedwoman (2.4).¹⁸ Vitellius himself spent time on Capri in his early youth *inter Tiberiana scorta* (3.2); later, he gained his father's political advancement and a special place at court by subjecting himself to all manner of indignities.¹⁹ No surprise, then, that when he was sent by Galba to Germany, Vitellius showed that he too was comfortable associating with inferiors in a way far beneath his station:

...tota via caligantium quoque militum obvios exosculans perque stabula ac deversoria mulionibus ac viatoribus praeter modum comis, ut mane singulos iamne iantassent sciscitaretur seque fecisse ructu quoque ostenderet. (7.3)

By the time the analysis of Vitellius' reign is reached in cc. 12-14, the groundwork has been well and firmly laid. Accordingly, Suetonius in his remarks about the reign proper (12) first mentions that Vitellius' advisors were people of the lowest sort: actors, chariot drivers, and the freedman Asiaticus, with whom he had had relations since boyhood; Vitellius was very much in his element among such base people.²⁰

Gluttony is also a hallmark of Vitellius' *prior uita* and is the second staple of Suetonius' analysis of the reign (13).²¹ Suetonius gives a series of examples de-

¹⁷ At the very beginning Suetonius points out the lowliness which some claim is a characteristic of Vitellian origins (1.1); cf. Tacitus who has Otho attribute these same qualities to Vitellius' adherents, *Hist.* 1.85: ...*sordis et obscuritatem Vitellianarum partium* ...; Tacitus also attributes to Vitellius *mobilitas ingenii*, 2.57 (cf. 3.84), *inexplebilis libido*, 2.62, and an inability to assume larger responsibilities (*impar curis gravioribus*, 2.59); see Murison (above, n. 7) on *Vit.* 1.1.

¹⁸ See Murison (above, n. 7), on *Vit.* 2.1 and 2.4.

¹⁹ 3.2; conversely, Tac. *Hist.* 3.86 states that Vitellius owed everything to his father; see Engel (above, n. 3) 348, n.12.

²⁰ 12: *magnam imperii partem non nisi consilio et arbitrio uilissimi cuiusque histrionum et aurigarum administravit et maxime Asiatici liberti*. Tac. *Hist.* 2.87, speaking of some who attached themselves to Vitellius' camp as he made his way slowly to Rome, says: *adgregabantur e plebe flagitiosa per obsequia Vitellio cogniti, scurrae, histriones, aurigae, quibus ille amicitiarum dehonostamentis mire gaudebat*; see Murison (above, n.7) on *Vit.* 12.1.

²¹ Cf. Dio 65.2.2 and 65.3.1-3; this vice is introduced into the biography by the remark that an uncle of Vitellius was *famosus cenarum magnificentia* (2.2). From that point onward,

tailing Vitellius' outlandish appetite for food. The series concludes with the assertion that Vitellius could not even restrain himself from consecrated meat or day-old scraps from wayside shops, thus reinforcing the picture of Vitellius' utter lack of scruple:

...ne in sacrificio quidem umquam aut itinere ullo temperavit, quin inter alia ibidem statim viscus et farris paene rapta e foco manderet circaque viarum popinas fumantia obsonia vel pridiana atque semesa. (13.3)

Moreover, Suetonius records a feast given by Vitellius' brother to celebrate the new emperor's arrival in Rome. The appellation *cena aduenticia* is used to describe this feast, adapting the language of the solemn occasion of an emperor's *adventus* to Vitellius' gluttony (13.2). As E. Gowers has noted, the name of the dish served, the 'Shield of Minerva', is in this context parodic of military exploits (in the same manner, one might add, as Vitellius' march and entry into Rome), and the exotic ingredients, imported from the limits of the empire, suggest that the point of world conquest is to ensure the resources to satisfy a single appetite.²²

Cruelty (*saevitia*), the third staple in Suetonius' analysis of the reign (14), does not manifest itself as such in Vitellius' *prior uita*, but it is simply the reverse of the affability and indulgence Vitellius exhibited while on the way up, before he came to power.²³ Once Vitellius achieves supreme power, he vents his cruelty on whomever he wishes and for whatever reason:

Pronus uero ad cuiuscumque et quacumque de causa necem atque supplicium nobiles uiros, condiscipulos et aequales suos, omnibus blanditiis tantum non ad societatem imperii adlicefactos uario genere fraudis occidit... (14.1)²⁴

the theme appears explicitly in a remark made by Galba (7.1), and an example of crudeness (7.3, quoted above); see Murison (above, n. 7) on *Vit.* 13.1.

²² E. Gowers, *The Loaded Table* (Oxford 1993), 21-22. See Tac. *Hist.* 2.62: *epularum foeda et inexplebilis libido ex urbe atque Italia inritamenta gulae gestabantur strepentibus ab utroque mari itineribus*. Plin. *NH* 35.163, states that the dish cost a million sesterces and required special cooking apparatus (cf. Dio 65.3.3). Vitellius had to resort to emetics to maintain his voracious dining habits, 13.1: *facile omnibus sufficiens uomitandi consuetudine* (and Dio 65.2.2).

²³ Cf. 7.3 (*facili ac prodigo animo*); Tiberius was described as *percivilis* early in his biography, only to burst out in unmitigated cruelty later on (*Tib.* 28; 57 ff.; cf. *Cal.* 15.1, 26-28, 34; *Ner.* 10.1, 33-38).

²⁴ Compare the wording of *Ner.* 37.1: *nullus posthac adhibitus dilectus aut modus interimendi quoscumque libuisset quacumque de causa*; cf. Dio 65.5; further, Engel (above, n. 3) 358-9 and n. 48.

One example of this trait stands out in particular. An unsuspecting person came calling to pay his respects to the emperor and was immediately taken away for execution; the fellow was only to be brought back and executed in Vitellius' presence so that the emperor could 'feed his eyes' (*pascere oculos*, 14.2), as though his gluttony extended to bloodlust. It should be noted that this example of cruelty has the same gustatory quality as the anecdote on the occasion when Vitellius visited the battlefield at Bedriacum (note the phrase 'optime olere hausit', 10.3).²⁵

With the characterization of Vitellius (cc. 1-11) and the analysis of the reign (cc. 12-14) complete, it remains for Suetonius to crystallize the portrait in Vitellius' last hours. Traits previously documented are prominent in c. 15. Venality and prodigality: Vitellius' attempt to buy support (*ad retinendum ergo ceterorum hominum studium ac fauorem nihil non publice priuatimque nullo adhibito modo largitus est*, 15.1;²⁶ and his offer to bargain with Flavius Sabinus for his life and a mere 100,000,000 sesterces.²⁷ Fecklessness: the emperor's vain attempts to abdicate (Suetonius documents three), which in the first two instances result in reversals due to public outcry, and in the third, the cognomen *Concordia* (15.4).²⁸ Finally, gluttony, again mixed with cruelty: when the emperor's troops unexpectedly trap those of Sabinus on the Capitoline and set fire to Jupiter's temple, Vitellius observes these events safely ensconced at table *e Tiberiana domo inter epulas* (15.3); fittingly, Vitellius' only companions in the end are a baker and a cook (*duobus solis comitibus, pistore et coco*, 16).²⁹

The finale of the *Vitellius*, with which we began, has attracted particular attention, especially the bodily description included in the crowd's jeering which forms a concise summary of the emperor's life. L. Braun has recently illustrated how Suetonius places in his description of the execution deft correspondences with information which he has provided earlier, demonstrat-

²⁵ The desire to view a fallen adversary was considered a mark of cruelty; cf., for example, *Aug.* 17.4, *Cal.* 28, *Ner.* 34.4; *Dio* 65.1.3; *Tac. Hist.* 2.70 (cf. 2.61), 3.39; and *Agr.* 45.2; also *Luc.* 7.786-803; see Murison (above, n. 7) on *Vit.* 14.1-2; Richter (above, n. 2) 253.

²⁶ Compare 8.1; *Tac. Hist.* 3.86: *amicitias dum magnitudine munerum, non constantia morum contineri putat, meruit magis quam habuit.*

²⁷ Compare 7.2, when Vitellius snatches his own mother's earring and pawns it to pay expenses.

²⁸ Reminiscent of uncle Publius who had a change of heart after opening his veins (2.4), and the craven Lucius, who, among other things, worshipped Caligula as a god and exclaimed *saepe facias* to Claudius as he was inaugurating the Secular Games (2.5); cf. *Vit.* 5.1 and Murison's note (above, n. 7) *ad loc.*

²⁹ Perhaps Vitellius at table watching the burning of the capitol is a Neronian echo (cf. *Ner.* 38.2 and G. B. Townend, 'Cluvius Rufus in the "Histories" of Tacitus,' *AJP* 85 [1964], 365; Murison [above, n. 7], 170); for Vitellius' companions in his final flight, see Richter (above, n. 2) 248-9.

ing his careful deliberateness in composition.³⁰ Braun's explication brings to light the interrelationship between the traits of Vitellius' character, related by various facts and details, and his death.³¹ This connection emerges gradually from the chronological narrative of Vitellius' life before accession, and then is distilled in the analysis of the reign. The narrative of the life is replete with examples of debauchery and desultory outrage, yet it is Suetonius' recapitulation of the emperor's flaws in the death scene that punctuates the characterization at the end.³²

This final scene is indeed crucial to the import of the biography as a whole, but one significant element has previously been neglected: the setting on the Gemonian Steps, and with this setting, a vital element of the overall dramatic and intellectual structure of the *Vita*. Braun, for example, notes that to die on the Gemonian Steps and to be dragged into the Tiber is the most shameful end for a Roman to meet, thereby merely implying the propriety of this setting for the summation of Vitellius' life.³³ Yet, the location of the Gemonian Steps is as much a dénouement of Suetonius' characterization as the execution itself. Although the same scene appears in Tacitus, it is less detailed and graphic, with a focus more on the psychological aspects of the scene and its effects on Vitellius. There is no denying the power of Tacitus' narrative, but his point of view is different, as though from Vitellius himself, and in this sense his narrative is 'sympathetic'.³⁴ On the other hand,

³⁰ Braun (above, n. 12) 209-10 ['Im Tod zeigt sich die Summe des Lebens']; *incendiarum* refers to the burning of Jupiter's temple on the Capitoline, and, perhaps, to the burning of Vitellius' dining quarters after he had been proclaimed emperor (8.2); *patinarium* and *venter obesus* call to mind the emperor's storied gluttony; the consumption of wine, here observed to have resulted in a ruddy complexion, is noted at 10.3; and finally, Vitellius' passion for the horses and chariot racing, mentioned at 4 and 14.3, evidently resulted in a wound, duly mentioned here.

³¹ Cf. W. Steidle, *Sueton und die antike Biographie* (Munich 1963²) 84; Braun, (above, n. 12); Cizek (above, n. 6) 128; Arist. *Poet.* 1451 b11 comments on the kind of specificity found in historical narrative, as opposed to the generalities found in poetry (see e.g. A. Dihle, *Die Entstehung der historischen Biographie*, SHAW, Ber. 3 [1987], 11).

³² J. Gascou, *Suéton historien* (Rome 1984) 797.

³³ See Braun (above, n.12) 207; cf. H. Gugel, *Studien zur biographischen Technik Suetons* (Wien 1977) 101-103; on death scenes in Suetonius in which emperors receive their due, Gascou (above, n.31) 797-8.

³⁴ At *Hist.* 3.74, Sabinus is murdered, beheaded, and dragged onto the Steps; at 3.85, Vitellius, at sword point, gazes upon his toppling statues, then upon the place where Galba was killed, and finally, at the Steps, where the body of Sabinus had been. Significantly, it was Vitellius' inability to empathize with the human lot that Tacitus chose to comment on when the emperor visited the battlefield at Bedriacum, *Hist.* 2.70: *et erant quos varia sors rerum lacrimaeque et misericordia subiret. at non Vitellius flexit oculos nec tot milia insepultorum civium exhorruit: laetus ultro et tam propinquae sortis ignarus ...*. On the contrast between

although he documents the whole scene as an objective observer, Suetonius makes use of the final scene on the Steps in a quite different way.

In the narrative leading up to this scene, Suetonius' characterization relied on highlighting the disparity between the emperor and his locus, for the characterization and circumstances did not match. The phrases '*imperator est consalutatus*,' '*itinere incohato per medias ciuitates ritu triumphantium*,' and '*urbem denique ad classicum introiit paludatus ferroque succinctus*' effectively serve as captions to the scenes in which they occur, subverting what might have been their official, laudatory, nature. Suetonius adapts these scenes to reflect poorly on Vitellius, and he can do so because they were contexts (*loci*) which had become stereotypical scenes of imperial advertisement. While this is generally true during the lavish displays of the Trajanic and Hadrianic eras, the troubled period after Domitian's murder, Nerva's accession and the adoption of Trajan is particularly relevant. As in the year A.D. 96, the theme of harmony between the armies and the emperor (*concordia, fides*) naturally became a catchphrase during the upheavals of A.D. 69; and thus we find the legend CONCORDIA and FIDES EXERCITUUM appearing on Vitellian coinage.³⁵ Formal address to the army (*adlocutio*, in certain instances involving *acclamatio*), and departure, arrival, and manner of travel itself (*profectio, adventus, iter*), are also contexts familiar from coins, Pliny's *Panegyricus*, and Trajan's Column.³⁶ An audience habituated to imperial representation, formalized and standardized after more than a century and a half

Suetonius' treatment of Vitellius' death and that of Tacitus, see Syme (above, n.6) 189-90, and Braun (above, n.12) 206-207.

³⁵ For coin-legends advertising relations between the *princeps* and the army during Vitellius' reign, see H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, vol. I: Augustus to Vitellius (London 1976 repr.), 368ff., CONCORDIA EXERCITUUM: nos. 1, 6, 20, 48, 65, 72; CONSENSUS EXERCITUUM: nos. 81-85, 103, 99-102, 110-112; FIDES EXERCITUUM: nos. 2, 86, 87, 103-104, 113-117; for the Trajanic and Hadrianic periods, see *ibid.*, vol. III: Nerva to Hadrian (London 1976 repr.), p. 1, nos. 4, 5, 6; p. 2, nos. 7, 8, 9, for examples of issues with the legend CONCORDIA EXERCITUUM (during Nerva's reign), and p. 154, no. 742 B, FIDES EXERCIT S C (early in Trajan's reign); for Hadrianic examples, see p. 414, nos. 1182-87; note the repetitions of *Concordia* in *Vit.* 15.4, and cf. *quiete publica* in 15.3.

³⁶ Mattingly (above, n.36) provides several examples of coins with the legend ADVENTVI (index V, s. v. ADVENTVI and ADVENTUS); for PROPECTIO, e.g., see p. 102, no. 511, p. 103, no. 513. Scenes of address to the army are numerous on Trajan's Column: (according to Cichorius' enumeration) scene X, XXVII, XLII, LIV, LXXIII, LXXXVII, CXXV (*acclamatio?*), CXXXVII. Depictions of Trajan on the march are also numerous on the Column; for example, scenes XXXIII, XXXIV, XLVI, LXXIX, LXXIV, LXXXI. Plin. *Pan.* 20, contrasts the journey of Trajan from Germany in A.D. 99 to Domitian's manner of travel; 22.1 describes Trajan's entry into Rome (cf. *Epp.* 10.10).

of the principate and of especial import at the time of reading, would have understood and appreciated the subversion of these scenes in Suetonius' representation of Vitellius.

Thus Vitellius is represented as a patent monstrosity; hence the scene of his execution in c. 17 epitomizes the qualities of the emperor's character so meticulously documented earlier in the text.³⁷ But the actions which take place on the Gemonian Steps are entirely appropriate as to place and person; at last Vitellius' character and circumstances achieve a gruesome but fitting harmony. Accordingly, Vitellius is treated like a common criminal (*reducto coma capite, ceu noxii solent*, 17.1), and subjected to the mockery and dung-slinging of the crowd: filth, insults, and violence corroborate the characterization. In the final scene there is no need to subvert an official imperial advertisement, for the meaning of the *locus* is self-evident. The details and sensationalism, which were previously parodic, now emphasize propriety and consistency through minute characterological correspondences. This is the reason that Suetonius' recapitulation of Vitellius' life at this point is so effective: because character is related so closely to the *locus* which typifies it.³⁸ Earlier contexts did not fit the man, nor vice versa; on the Gemonian Steps, each reinforces the other. Hence, the details in this scene are not included merely for their own sake,³⁹ for these details are germane to the portrait and thoroughly consonant with Suetonian technique.⁴⁰ The baker and cook who accompanied him in attempted flight (*duobus solis comitibus, pistore et coco*), and the 'girdle' filled with gold pieces (*zona se aureorum plena circumdedit*, 16), are telling references to Vitellius' besetting flaws of gluttony and avarice; and the act of dragging Vitellius' body by a hook to the Tiber after his murder (*inde unco tractus in Tiberim*, 17.2) is worthy of any savagery he committed during his reign. Just as Vitellius' reign recapitulated the vices of his former life, so his end, both in manner and in place, was a decisively fitting conclusion to his reign. Now at last, status, character, place, space and text are one,⁴¹ in a

³⁷ Cizek (above, n.6) 128-29.

³⁸ The systematic explication of this idea is as old as the Hippocratic treatise *Airs, Waters, Places* (esp. 12, 16, 23-24; cf. also, of course, Herodotus). For the idea applied to the urban topography of Rome, described according to the type of person to be found in specific places, see Plaut. *Curc.* 4.1.467-473; Sen. *de Vit. beat.* 7.3 applies the principle in a philosophical vein; further, E. W. Leach, *The Rhetoric of Space* (Princeton 1988) 74; A. Vasaly, *Representations: Images of the World in Ciceronian Oratory* (Berkeley 1993), 131-155.

³⁹ M. Fuhrmann, *Der Kleine Pauly*, Bd. 5, s. v. Sueton (Munich 1975); for Suetonius' similarly careful treatment of the death scene of Julius Caesar, see H. Gugel, 'Caesars Tod,' *Gymnasium* 77 (1970) 5-22; on *ultima uerba* in general, Gugel (above, n. 32) 95-103.

⁴⁰ Steidle (above, n. 4) 102, 'das Prinzip der Charakterisierung durch Fakten'.

⁴¹ Compare n.10 above.

complex but satisfying unity that is the product of Suetonius' own subtle—and easily underestimated—literary artistry.

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